

What Does a Successful Church Look Like?

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[0 : 00] Well, today we are continuing our study in Paul's letter to the Romans. And we're coming towards the end of this. I think there have just been maybe two or three more sermons as we draw near the end of the letter.

Alistair kindly read for us the second half of chapter 15, and we're going to focus on that particularly in the middle section, and we can read again at verse 14.

Paul writes, I myself am satisfied about you, my brothers, that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge, and able to instruct one another.

As I'm sure you've spotted from the bulletin, this morning I want us to ask a question, and that is the question, what does a successful church look like?

That's a very important thing for us to consider, because we want our congregations, both ourselves and other congregations across the wider church. We want to do well. We don't want to fail.

[0 : 58] We don't want to be unsuccessful as a congregation, as a church. But of course, that raises the question, what does success look like in the church?

And I'm sure there's various things that spring to mind. We can think, well, perhaps first of all, we think of size. A successful church is big. We can think of activities. A successful church has lots of different things going on.

We can think of resources. So a successful church is wealthy, and it's got enough staff. It's able to support various ministries. It's got a good building, good audio-visual equipment.

It's got a good setup. We can think in terms of organization. A successful church is well-run and well-functioning.

All of these things, of course, are very important, and we value them, and we want to ensure that these are areas that we work towards.

[1 : 56] But are these the things that are really most important in a church? Are these the defining characteristics of success? Well, the verse before you there in Romans 15, I think, is a very important verse in this whole area, because here Paul tells us three things that he regards as the hallmarks of a successful church.

He uses a very interesting phrase just at the very beginning. He says that he's satisfied about this church in Rome. That word satisfied could also be translated persuaded. It conveys the idea that Paul is convinced about this congregation.

As he looks at them, his judgment is that they are doing well. He is satisfied. To him, they are a success. And then in the rest of the verse, he gives us three statements which reveal what that success looks like.

And as is so often the case, it's none of the things that first popped into your minds. He is satisfied with them because, one, they are full of goodness.

Two, they are filled with all knowledge. And three, they are able to instruct one another. And I do wonder if this is one of these verses where we come to it and we think, why did you pick those things, Paul?

[3 : 20] These aren't the things that tend to come to our minds. But Paul is telling us these are the things that are important.

And so I want us to just look together at them for a wee while today. So number one, a successful church is full of goodness. And that's a very interesting phrase because a phrase like full of goodness is the kind of phrase that can almost just bounce off us.

Because there's a sense in which it's so obvious, it's not worth saying, but at the same time, it's so optimistic, it's not really worth expecting.

So theoretically we will endorse a statement like that, but functionally we will probably dismiss it. For example, supposing I went off to one of these big church conferences that happened in America or somewhere like that.

If I went there and somebody came up to me and said, what do you want your church to be? What's your strategy, Thomas? What's your vision for St. Columbus? If I replied and said, to be full of goodness, I think they would probably think that I was at best naive or at worst a bit deluded.

[4 : 36] And we can all read a phrase like full of goodness and really not take it that seriously. But of course that would be a mistake because there is nothing written in the Bible that we shouldn't be taking seriously.

So when Paul identifies being full of goodness as a strategic target for the church, he's not being naive, he's not being optimistic, he is not being deluded, he's saying, that's your objective. So if we want to be a successful church, then we need to be aiming towards being full of goodness. We'll just unpack that phrase a wee bit more because the language that Paul uses is very interesting.

The word goodness conveys the idea of a kind of moral excellence, an uprightness of heart where we're characterised by good and not by evil. And that uprightness of heart, that inward moral excellence, shows itself outwardly, shows itself in our attitudes, our words, our actions, and it can be expressed in kindness, generosity, sharing, in acting for the benefit of others.

Goodness is that brilliant standard of attitude and behaviour. The word for full is a really interesting word because it's actually quite rare and it actually means very full.

[6 : 04] It means to fill a space beyond expectations and it can also mean to be constantly preoccupied with something. So in other words, Paul is saying a successful church is obsessed with goodness.

Our goal is to be bursting with goodness and that applies across every part of our church. So there's loads of different things going on in our congregation.

We have a church session that's our elders who lead the church and have responsibility for the spiritual wellbeing of the congregation. We have our Deacons Court. They are more responsible for looking after the material needs of people and of the congregation of serving and of helping and of making sure that people are okay.

We've got our pastoral teams, a small group based around each of the pastoral areas in the city who have responsibility, both men and women, for looking after the people in our city groups and in the wider pastoral areas.

We have our welcome team. We have our music. We have our audiovisual team at the back. We have the people downstairs doing kids' church and Cresce. We have all these different things and whatever you look in all of these places, you want to be finding goodness.

[7 : 25] We want all these places to be full of goodness. That's the hallmark that Paul identifies of a successful church and it's a huge encouragement to all of us because whatever your job is in the church, you can bring goodness to that role because whatever our personalities are, whatever our gifts are, we can bring goodness along with us as we serve and participate in the church.

You might be very quiet and very shy, but you can still be full of goodness. You might be very confident, bubbly and outgoing. You can still be full of goodness. You might be super organized and efficient, but you can still be full of goodness.

You might be much, much happier just to blend into the background, but you can still be full of goodness. It's a key characteristic of a healthy church.

As with all of these things, there's clear theological basis for that. That phrase, full of goodness, is a brilliant reminder of a wonderful theological truth that God's goal for life is that it would be full of goodness.

When we say that we want church to be full of goodness, when Paul tells us to aim for this, we don't actually just mean our Sunday services. We mean every part of our lives as the people of God, as his church.

[8 : 51] The reason for that is because God has wanted goodness for humanity from the very beginning. It's been God's great goal, that life would be full of goodness.

One of the greatest tools that the devil has used to lure people away from God is to tell them the lie that says, God doesn't really want what's good for you.

So many people have fallen for that. So many people think that following God is going to make my life worse, not better, that God is going to be a spoiler of all that is good in my life.

That is one of the biggest lies that the devil has told humanity, and it is one of the greatest blasphemies that the world has ever known.

Because God himself is so, so good. And when God created human life, of which you are a part, he created it to be so, so good.

[9 : 57] And we know from the biblical narrative that that's been broken and ruined by sin. And that was a sin that resulted from what? From the devil's lie that God wasn't really being good to Eve.

That was how he did it. He deceived Eve into thinking that God didn't really have her best interests at heart.

And so the old humanity, broken and sin, instead of enjoying the goodness that God intended for us, has now been infected with badness.

And it's, as I think I've said many times, it's the easiest doctrine in the Bible to prove because the evidence is everywhere. But of course, the great message of the Gospel is that through Jesus Christ, a work of restoration has begun, a new humanity, a restored humanity is being raised up. And God's great goal, his objective, is that life for us is going to be full of goodness again. And that's the ultimate destiny for the people of God, that when Christ returns and the new heavens and the new earth are brought in, their life will be so, so good again.

[11 : 16] But now, now there is a place where we get a glimpse of the blessings of the world to come. Now there is a place where we should be able to see a foretaste of all the goodness that God has lined up for the new humanity.

There's a place where you can see it. Where is that place? It's in the church. And that's why a church that is successful is one that is full, very full of goodness.

And of course, in contrast to that, this is why badness in a church is so wrong and so damaging.

And you go through the New Testament again and again and again, you will see clear warnings against bitterness, deceit, envy, strife, division, slander, malice, selfishness, gossip, criticism, all these bad things that are like pollution in a church and that are like pollution for the human race.

And this is where we have to guard our own hearts because just as we can be a source of goodness, we can also be a source of badness. And I look at myself in all of that and I look at my speech and I think, how often am I full of goodness in what I say?

[12 : 48] And then perhaps even worse, I think, how often am I full of goodness in what I think? And yet this is what we're being called to.

And by God's grace, I now want to make it my goal to be full of goodness. And this also makes perfect sense in terms of our witness to the wider world as a church because no one wants badness.

So yes, people live their lives without much thought of God and people all around us live their lives without any interest in church. But these people are still made in the image of God and for that reason, they still know that goodness is better than badness.

Nobody wants bad neighbors, nobody wants bad friends, no one wants a bad husband, no one wants bad colleagues, no one wants a bad boss, no one wants bad parents, no one wants badness, which is why a church that is full of goodness is exactly what the world of 2019 needs. And that's why it's no surprise that Paul says, that's your objective. Aim for that. A successful church is full of goodness.

[14 : 09] Number two, a successful church is filled with all knowledge. Very often when we're preaching and very often when we're considering the aspects of the important aspects in our life as part of a church, our focus tends to be on the heart.

So goodness, for example, while it's shown in our speech and in our actions, in so many ways it's primarily an issue of the heart, isn't it?

And the Christian message is a message to your heart. It's a message of love, a message of healing, of peace and of joy. The heart is so important in terms of our relationship with God, which is why a hard heart is deadly.

But the fact that the Bible is speaking to your heart does not for one second mean that the Bible is not also speaking to your mind.

And that's why Paul reminds us here that if we are aiming to be a successful church, then we must aim to be filled with all knowledge.

[15 : 21] We said a moment ago that one of the devil's great lies is that God doesn't really want to be good to us. That's, I think, possibly one of the devil's biggest lies, perhaps.

But one of his other big lies that he has spread about Christianity is that it is mindless. And that's what leads a lot of people to oppose Christianity.

People don't like it because they think that it's mindless. It's just a denial of reality, a denial of evidence, a denial of facts, and it's just a mindless leap of faith.

And it's probably been the case in the last two or three hundred years that even Christians have behaved as though the mind is not that important.

And often you'll find that faith and reason are kept quite separate. And instead of focusing on knowledge and understanding and reason, we've tended to focus more on feelings and on experience.

[16 : 25] And the key point I want to emphasize is that mindless Christianity is not biblical Christianity. Again and again and again, the Bible seeks to engage with their minds.

And again and again and again, we're being challenged to think. You go back to the Old Testament, a huge chunk of the Old Testament is what we call wisdom literature. We go to Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, Job.

That huge chunk of material is classified by what we call wisdom literature. In other words, it's all about making you think. And it's all about making you understand the world in which you live.

And then when you go through to the New Testament, again and again and again, we are being told to think, to set our minds in a certain way, to understand. As a couple of chapters earlier, Paul tells us that part of the transforming work of the Gospel in our lives is that we are changed through the renewing of our minds.

And so a key part of the Bible's aim is to give us knowledge. That's why it's a book full of information. It's full of detail.

[17 : 40] And a key part of being a disciple is learning. That's really what the word disciple means, a disciple is a learner. God wants us to think.

God wants us to understand the world that we live in. That's why we need to be filled with all knowledge. But did you notice the we word there?

I often say this sometimes is the we words that are most important. We're to be filled with all knowledge. And I think that is there because Paul is saying that as Christians, we should not just be full of Bible knowledge.

Yes, we should be and we want to be. But rather we are seeking to grow and to be knowledgeable in every area of life and of understanding. Now that doesn't mean that we're going to be experts in everything.

That's impossible. But I think it does mean that our knowledge of every area of the universe, every single area of the universe is to be utterly bound up with our knowledge of God.

[18 : 47] In other words, our worldview is to be shaped by all that the Bible teaches us.

One of the big names of Christianity, one of the kind of famous names that we often mention is John Calvin. John Calvin lived 500 years ago and his name appears again and again and again and again throughout the centuries in which he lived.

He wrote a very famous book. It's called Institutes of the Christian Religion. And it probably sounds scary and I certainly used to think I would never be able to read a book like that.

But I have to say to my pleasant surprise, it's not nearly as scary as you think and it's not actually too hard to read. It's nicely divided. It's just in we sections.

Although it's a huge book, the sections are small. So don't ever be afraid to have a go at reading a wee bit of John Calvin. And the reason I mention him is because that great book, Institutes of the Christian Religion, begins with a vital point.

[19 : 50] As he sets out in order to explain Christianity as clearly as he possibly can, John Calvin starts by making it absolutely clear that the only way we are going to have knowledge of ourselves is if, first of all, we have a knowledge of God.

That's the quote that I've put on the sheet and it's there on the screen before you. Man never attains to a true self-knowledge until he has previously contemplated the face of God and come down from after such contemplation to look into himself.

The great point that that's making is that if you want to really understand the world, you need, first of all, to learn about God.

Our worldview needs to have the Bible at the very center of it. And our claim as Christians, and this is something that if anyone who's not a Christian, I would want you to be very clear on this point.

Our claim as Christians, it's not simply that following Jesus is a wonderful blessing in your life. It's not simply that the Bible is important. Our claim as Christians is actually far bigger than that.

[21 : 06] Our claim is that the only worldview that ultimately makes sense is the biblical worldview.

That's our claim. And it's an absolutely enormous claim to make, but it's entirely logical because if God is the creator of the universe, then even basic common sense tells us that we are never going to understand that universe properly if we make no reference to him.

But if our knowledge is shaped by God's own word, by what is revealed to us through the Bible, then it's going to enable us to properly understand the world around us.

It's easy to think that Christianity is just about helping you through life or doing something nice on a Sunday or being a better person. In many ways, that's what Christianity has kind of become to many people in Britain.

But that is a tragic and gross diminishing of what the Bible is really claiming to be. The message of the Bible is way, way bigger than that. The Bible is saying that the message of Jesus Christ is the only place where you will be able to make sense of the universe.

[22 : 23] God wants you to have two reliable, logical knowledge. And I think we can test this.

These are big claims, but I think we can test it. Here are some statements that I think virtually everybody in Scotland would agree with.

Family is special. Cancer is bad. Life is precious. Justice is wrong.

Joy is good. Nature is beautiful. Love is most important of all.

These are statements I think that only a fraction of people would disagree with. I think it's something that many, many people would hold to. The test is this.

[23 : 25] How do you know any of that is true? How does the person on the street know that any of that is true?

And this may be a wee bit of an overgeneralisation, but I think that we can say that there are three different responses to that question that people fall into.

When we raise the question of how we actually know that these things are true, I think people who have no reference to God in their lives fall into three categories.

Category number one is distraction. And that's the category that most people fall into. It's the most popular choice. Just don't think about it. And fill your life with other stuff.

Fill your life with entertainment. Fill your life with activities. Fill your life with just a constant stream of distractions so that you never, ever, ever have to stop and ask yourself what is life all about?

[24 : 32] And we see this more and more and more, particularly in the world of social media, just a saturation of distraction so we never have to stop and think about ourselves.

So option one is just distraction. Option two is denial. So even though people will embrace a worldview that actually pushes them away from these statements, people will then deny the conclusions of their own worldview.

So a great example of that is atheistic naturalism, the view that the world is just this closed box, God does not exist, and everything, absolutely everything is just contained within this closed box and everything can be explained in terms of just connections and developments in a sort of chain reaction within this closed circuit box.

That's a worldview that says at best love and beauty and people are just accidents and ultimately they have no value.

But people can't live with that. And so they deny the conclusions of their own worldview and they just hold on to a value in these areas instead. So option one is distraction.

[25 : 54] Option two is denial. Option three is despair. And that's the least popular option. But it is the most rational and most logical.

And this is often where godless thinkers find themselves. So when I say a godless thinker, I am thinking about somebody who really thinks the great philosophers and artists and musicians of the twentieth century, a good example, people who really think but who have no god in their lives and the place they find themselves is in despair.

And if you look at that and if I ask yourself, if I ask you how do you know if that's true, I want to ask you, are you in the category of distraction?

Are you in the category of denial? Are you in the category of despair? And all of this is showing us why knowledge is so important in a church because if you think about it, knowledge gives us answers.

And all around us are people desperately looking for answers. Life is so cruel, so perplexing, so frustrating. People everywhere are looking for answers.

[27 : 26] And the Bible gives us a knowledge that provides us with exactly that. The Bible explains beauty, it explains family, it explains suffering, it explains pain, it explains love.

If you're looking for answers, the Bible will give them to you. A biblical worldview gives us an answer to all of these things. It tells us that family is special because we've been made in the image of a God at the core of whose being is mutual love and relationship as Father, Son and Spirit.

Bible tells us that cancer is bad along with every other disease. It's an infection into a world that should never be there. It's part of a curse that God wants to put right.

The Bible tells us that life is precious because every single person is not some pointless accident or some collection of machinery parts just functioning together.

Every single person is someone who's been made in the image of God. Bible tells us that injustice is wrong because God is a God of righteousness and truth and fairness.

[28 : 29] Bible tells us that joy is good because there are so many things to enjoy from God. He is a benevolent, merciful, providing God. Bible tells us that nature is beautiful because it's the work of God's hands.

The Bible tells us that love is most important of all because that's God's core attribute. And He is the source of everything else that there is.

The knowledge that the Bible will give you is brilliant. Knowledge gives us answers. But knowledge also gives us assurance.

If you think back over Romans that we've been studying, we think even a huge amount of information, chapter 1 to chapter 11 is just filling us with knowledge. Paul has taught our minds a huge amount our knowledge has grown.

And that knowledge should give you assurance, amazing assurance. Because sometimes our hearts can make us wobble.

[29 : 39] Sometimes our feelings can leave us with a sense of insecurity. Sometimes our guts can make us think that God would not want to know us.

But we must never forget that the stuff you know in your head should constantly reassure your heart.

So you might feel conscious of your sin and think, can the law condemn me? Am I going to be condemned by God? If your faith is in Jesus, the answer to that is no.

Because your justification, your head knowledge of that justification tells you that that's impossible.

Can sin destroy you? No it can't. Because you are united to Jesus Christ by faith.

Can your weaknesses spoil your relationship with God? No. Because you are His adopted child if you are trusting in Jesus. Can the pressures of life isolate you from God? No.

[30 : 34] Because He's come to dwell right in your heart by His Holy Spirit. You can't go anywhere where He is not with you. Can the power of evil threaten you? Can anything separate you from God?

No way. Because nothing, not even death itself can separate you from the love of God in Jesus Christ. And knowledge that we have in our heads should pour reassurance into your heart.

A successful church is filled with knowledge. And of course, if you look at those first two, to be full of goodness and to be filled with all knowledge, that's a brilliant combination, isn't it?

A place that's so good to be part of. But it's not mindless. It's utterly rational and filled with reliable knowledge.

But there's one final hallmark I want us to look at briefly. A successful church is able to instruct one another. Again, the words that Paul uses are really interesting.

[31 : 37] The word instruct could also be translated admonish. It could be translated advise. It could even be translated to warn someone. And that's something that Paul himself has done for these Christians in Rome.

Throughout this letter, he's instructing them. And at times, he's had to be quite bold in verse 15. The next verse, he said that he's had to be bold at times. But all of that instruction and warning is in the context of God's grace and with the goal of helping these Roman Christians grow into the people

that God wants and needs them to be.

And so the key lesson for us is that if we want to be a successful church, a vital part of that is to be able to warn and instruct one another.

And as always, it fits together perfectly. It makes perfect sense. The whole concept of goodness implies right and wrong. So some things are bad for us.

Some things are good for us. The whole concept of knowledge implies being able to learn. And for it's obvious that we need to instruct one another.

[32 : 46] But for a lot of people, this might sound off-putting. It's easy to think, I don't want to be instructed. I do not want to be told what to do.

And we tend to think in life in 2019 that we shouldn't really be subject to anybody else's instruction. That's a common mindset.

I answer to myself, and I'm not going to be instructed by anyone else. Well, I wonder if that really is true.

Because if you think about the really important stuff in life, in these situations, we all want to be told what to do.

So imagine there's a security alert at the airport. You would most definitely want the staff to tell you what to do. If you were hoping to secure the purchase of a house, you would definitely need a solicitor to tell you exactly what steps you should be taking.

[33 : 52] And if you were in a room with a child who all of a sudden started having breathing difficulties, if you dialed 999, you would do everything that the person on that phone would instruct you to do.

When we are talking about the important things in life, being instructed is a brilliant thing. And for us as a church, the message of the Bible is by a mile the most important thing in our lives.

And that's why instruction and even warning is an incredibly important thing in the church. And please don't make the mistake of thinking that the idea of warning implies harshness.

It's easy to think that when we hear the concept of warning, it's like a kind of punishment giving you a warning because I'm not happy with you and I want to kind of give you a row, I'm going to give you a warning. That's a complete misunderstanding because biblical warning does not imply harshness.

biblical warning implies the deepest level of love. If you like somebody, then you'll tell them the nice things that they want to hear.

[35 : 12] But if you love someone, you will tell them the hard things that they need to hear. And two important questions arise for us.

One, are we ready to instruct one another? In order to do that, it's so important that we learn what the Bible says. We need to have that knowledge necessary to instruct one another.

That's why learning is so important. But we don't just need to know what the Bible says, we need to know each other as well. You can't instruct someone or warn someone if you don't know them or know what circumstances they're facing, which is why it's so important to spend time together and to get to know one another.

That's why it's brilliant to spend every Sunday, every Wednesday evening together, where we get to know our Bibles more and where we get to know each other more. We need to ask ourselves the question, are we ready to instruct?

But the second question is maybe even more important. Are we ready to be instructed?

[36 : 19] Because when Paul says that a successful church is able to instruct one another, it doesn't just mean that the people in the church are good at instructing, it also means that the people are good at listening.

And for many of us, that is perhaps where the greatest challenge lies. Sometimes our pride can make us reluctant to listen.

Sometimes our pride can make us reluctant to ask for instructions. Maybe I have to reveal one of my greatest faults. If I'm in a supermarket and I can't find something, I never want to ask someone. Want to just find it myself. And it's so silly because the person right there knows where it is and you don't think, no, I'll find it myself. And it's so easy to think, I'm not going to be instructed by anybody, I'll do it.

And yet it's so silly, so foolish. In our church, we want to recognize that instruction is a wonderful thing. It's something that we all need.

[37 : 23] So how are you going to define success in a church? What does a successful church look like? A successful church is full of goodness. It's filled with all knowledge. It's able to instruct one another.

These are the things that we want to aim for. And of course, that means that numbers are pretty irrelevant. And resources don't really matter, and the measure of our success doesn't really lie in the amount of activities we have.

These things are good, but they should come second. And again, that makes sense because I'm fairly certain that a church that's full of goodness, filled with knowledge, and able to instruct one another is the kind of church that people will definitely want to be a part of.

By God's grace, that's what we want to be. Let's go for it. Amen. God our Father, we thank you for the instruction of your word.

And so often we find ourselves with our priorities being challenged by you. And the things that we think are important, we discover are actually not that or not as important as other areas.

[38 : 35] We pray that we really would be full of goodness, that we will be obsessed with goodness. Just towards one another, and goodness in all of our dealings in every part of a congregation.

We pray that we will be filled with all knowledge, that we'd have very teachable minds, and that we'd have an ever greater appetite for the truth that your word tells us.

And we pray that we will be able to instruct one another, that we would be ready to give and receive instruction, and that all of that would be the outworking of a deep love that we will have for each other as part of your church.

And we pray, oh God, for any who are maybe yet to put their faith in you. We pray that you would draw them as well, and that they would also come to contribute to making us the kind of church that you want us to be.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Amen.